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Several cases of leptospirosis illness reported in Okinawa

U. S. Naval Hospital Okinawa Public Affairs

CAMP FOSTER – Military public health officials have reported a significant spike in the number of presumed leptospirosis cases among active duty personnel due to exposure to contaminated bodies of water in northern Okinawa.

According to the U. S. Naval Hospital Okinawa (USNHO) Public Health Department, the spike was traced back to operational units conducting jungle training in northern Okinawa. All of the units involved in the training evolution were exposed to contaminated water with approximately 56 personnel showing symptoms of infection presumed to be leptospirosis.

The illness is limited only to personnel directly exposed to contaminated fluids, and is not transmitted through human-to-human contact. There is no evidence that it is present in either base or local drinking water.

“The infection is caused by exposure to the *Leptospira* bacteria in the urine of infected animals that gets into fresh water directly or is carried from the soil into ponds or streams through runoff,” said USNHO Director of Public Health. “The bacteria enters the body through ingestion, mucus membranes or through cuts and scratches in the skin. Leptospirosis commonly occurs by drinking or having contact with soil or water (such as by swimming, rafting or kayaking) that has been contaminated by urine or body fluids of infected animals or by exposure to the urine or body fluids of infected animals.”

A large number of patients have been admitted to the hospital for leptospirosis treatment, which has affected some other services the hospital provides.

“Because of the large number of leptospirosis patients, we have almost reached full inpatient bed capacity. As a result, we have contacted some patients to reschedule elective surgery for a later time when the availability of hospital beds improves,” said Capt. Jeffrey Korsnes, USNHO Executive Officer.

“While it’s an inconvenience for our patients to reschedule, so far everyone’s been very understanding once they know what’s going on. Our priority is the comfort and safety of our patients,” said Korsnes.

Emergency and medically necessary surgeries have not been affected, according to hospital officials. Patients will be contacted directly by hospital staff if their procedure needs to be rescheduled. Primary care, specialty clinics and other outpatient services continue to operate as usual.

According to the U. S. Centers for Disease Control, leptospirosis can lead to potentially fatal infections of the kidney, liver, brain, lung or heart if not treated immediately. Symptoms of leptospirosis can appear from two days to four weeks from exposure, and can include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Severe headaches
- Muscle aches
- Nausea & vomiting
- Jaundice (yellow skin and eyes)
- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhea
- Skin rash

“Leptospirosis is common in freshwater areas and around waterfalls in the northern parts of the island. We advise against swimming in local freshwater streams and waterfalls here in Okinawa,” said Shusko.

Anyone that believes they may be experiencing symptoms of leptospirosis should seek medical help immediately.

For more information about leptospirosis, visit the U. S. Centers for Disease Control website at <http://www.cdc.gov/leptospirosis>.

U. S. Naval Hospital Okinawa is the largest overseas military treatment facility in the Navy, serving a beneficiary population of 55,000 active duty personnel, family members, civilian employees, contract personnel, and retirees. The facility also provides referral services for over 189,000 beneficiaries throughout the western Pacific.

For more news and information about U. S. Naval Hospital Okinawa, visit www.navy.mil/sites/nhoki or the hospital's official Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usnho.

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